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C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 000340

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA; NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MUSTAFA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PBTS KWBG KPAL KDEM IS

SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS: ELECTION DAY

SITREP # 2 AS OF 12:30 PM, JANUARY 25, 2006

REF: A. JERUSALEM 338  
    1B. JERUSALEM 324

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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11. (C) As of 12:30 pm local time, Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections continued to go smoothly. There was media coverage of PA President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Hamas leader Mohammed Zahar casting votes in their respective locations. There continued to be reports of some voting irregularities, including a report from Rafah of 15 Hamas women being arrested for using gloves to try and vote twice. A polling station in Khan Younis was temporarily closed because of overcrowding. President Abbas met with Senator Biden and the Consul General early on January 25 to discuss the possible election outcome, security reform, the formation of a new cabinet, and next steps with Israel. There were reports of altercations between supporters of different parties in East Jerusalem and Hebron. Hamas also was reported to have set up tents with computers outside polling stations in Gaza, but PA security forces had dismantled some of those tents. Members of Jewish extremist group Kahane Chair were arrested at the polling site in Jerusalem's Old City, along with two Israeli Knesset members. End summary.

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Elections Continue to Go Smoothly  
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12. (C) PDOFF reported that, as of 10:35 am, voter turnout at the Beit Hanina Post Office in Jerusalem (550 eligible voters) was 20 percent and voting was expected to be completed by early afternoon. PolOff reported that, at 10:45 am, elections were proceeding smoothly at the Beitunia Girls School in Ramallah though voter turnout was still light. Hamas was using five buses to transporting Hamas members to the polling site, while Fatah was operating one bus. At the al-Najah School in Ramallah, PolOff reported that elections were proceeding smoothly there, too, with a steady stream of voters since polls opened at 7:00 am. A National Democratic Institute (NDI) election observer there confirmed that there had been no problems, even with a small contingent of Hamas supporters at the site. At another Ramallah polling place, PolOff reported that illiterate voters had been assisted by family members or friends, with a monitor observing them. PDOFF reported that operations at the Central Election Commissions' headquarters in Ramallah were proceeding smoothly in the morning.

13. (C) A USAID FSN based in Gaza reported that Fatah Campaign Manager Nabil Shaath walked into a polling station

in a refugee camp, accompanied by 5 armed guards. People outside the station complained about the apparent breach of election rules, which bar armed personnel inside polling areas. They noted that an armed Hamas member had peacefully left the same station earlier when asked to do so by election monitoring staff.

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Abbas Meets with Senator Biden  
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¶4. (C) Senator Joseph Biden D-DE) and the Consul General met with President Abbas for 30 minutes during the morning of January 25. They discussed the possible election outcome, election security, the formation of the next government, and working with the GOI post-elections. Abbas described what had been done so far on reforming the security structure. He noted the continued PA need for weapons and ammunition. Abbas said he was ready to work with Acting Israeli Prime Minister Olmert.

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Some Voting Irregularities  
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¶5. (C) PolOff reported extensive Israeli Police presence at the Shu'fat Post Office polling station in northern Jerusalem before it opened but confirmed that the Police dispersed when the polling station opened at 7:00 am. He reported that the Israeli police had harassed voters who were worried that they might lose their residency status in Jerusalem if they voted at the Shu'fat Post Office. PolOff reported in Ramallah that political parties were distributing party paraphernalia at the polling station site.

¶6. (C) RSO received reports at 11:45 am that Palestinian Authority Police arrested 15 women members of Hamas in Rafah City in the Gaza Strip for wearing rubber gloves and attempting to vote a second time. RSO also reported that Palestinian Authority Security Forces temporarily closed a polling station at Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip because it was too crowded. They plan to reopen the polling station when order is restored.

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Security Incidents  
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¶7. (C) The RSO reported that at 10:09 am there was a brief altercation between Fatah and Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) supporters at the Salah Ed-din Post Office in East Jerusalem. Israeli National Police broke up the disturbance five minutes later. The RSO received a report of an altercation between Hamas and al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigades members at the El-Mashni School in Hebron.

¶8. (C) At 10:40 am, the RSO received reports that Hamas tried setting up tents with computers near polling sites in the Gaza Strip but Palestinian police subsequently dismantled the tents. A USAID FSN reported that Hamas was using computers equipped with databases outside of other Gaza polling areas; voters provide their ID number, which is logged, and then Hamas staff direct the voter to the polling station. The RSO also received a report that five gunmen from the al-Aqsa Martyrs' brigades were spotted on a rooftop near one of the polling sites in Rafah in the Gaza Strip. Police removed the gunmen from the premises.

¶9. (C) At 10:45 am, the RSO received report that Hamas members tried to take control of a road near the Sur Bahir Post Office in Jerusalem, in order to direct voters to the polling station. The Israeli National Police intervened and told them that they could not control the road.

¶10. (C) Members of the Jewish extremist Kahane Chai organization were denied entry at the Jaffa Gate Post Office polling site in Jerusalem's Old City, and two members were arrested, according to RSO reports. The RSO also reported

that Israeli Knesset members Efi Eitan and Arieh Eldad were also arrested as they attempted to protest at that same site.

¶11. (C) Poloff reported, at 10:30 am, that a series of shots were heard near the Aziz Shaheen Girls' School polling station in Ramallah. He said that some of the PASF members immediately departed from the polling station to investigate the shooting.

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Media reports  
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¶12. (SBU) Palestinian and pan-Arab stations continued to focus on the elections during their mid-morning programs. All stations reported that voting so far has been calm and noted the large numbers of PA security forces on hand. All stations also reported a steady flow of voters to the polls in all areas. In late morning coverage, the Palestinian and pan-Arab media election coverage focused on "man-on-the-street" interviews, as well as commentary/analysis that noted that the elections process seemed to be going smoothly.

-- Both PBC and al-Jazeera showed President Abbas casting his vote at the Muqata in Ramallah, where he encouraged the Palestinian people to engage in the democratic process and said that "the next step after the election is the formation of a government."

-- Al Jazeera carried footage of Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahhar voting in Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip. The Al-Jazeera correspondent in Hebron reported that Israeli forces had forbidden any voting polls to open in the Old City there.

-- Al Hurra showed coverage of Salah Ed-din Post Office, the largest voting site in East Jerusalem, where two Islamic groups were protesting the elections and Fatah supporters were shouting slogans.

-- PBC, which is interspersing its reports with national songs that encourage people to vote, reported that Israeli checkpoints were hindering voters from entering the Abu Dis area outside of Jerusalem, where there are a number of voting

sites.

-- PBC, al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyyeh all broadcast live a press conference by CEC chairman Hanna Nasser in Ramallah. Al Arabiyyeh also showed a special program called "Palestine Elects" in which analysts and CEC reps discussed the role of foreign observers in these elections as well as the role of women in the new PLC. The program noted that more than 900 observers are present, including former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary Madeleine Albright.

-- Al-Hurra broadcast an interview with Hanan Ashrawi, who characterized her "Third Way" party's agenda as flexible and enlightened.

-- Nile Sat broadcast an interview with Fadwa Barghouthi, the wife of jailed leader Marwan Barghouthi. She said, "Even behind bars, Marwan Barghouthi has a big influence on the Palestinian elections."

¶13. (SBU) Poloff reported that Senator Biden gave an interview to al-Quds and al-Ayyam reporters at the al-Najah School polling station in Ramallah.

WALLES